

Nasser, Gamal Abdel

{nah'-sur, guh-mahl' ab'-duhl}

An Egyptian statesman and army officer, Gamal Abdel Nasser, b. Jan. 15, 1918, d. Sept. 28, 1970, was president of Egypt from 1954 to 1970. As a youth he became a revolutionary opposed to British rule in Egypt. By 1949 he had organized the Free Officers, a revolutionary military group that forced King FAROUK from the throne in 1952. Gen. Muhammad Naguib became president and premier of the republic proclaimed in 1953, but in 1954, Nasser ousted Naguib and assumed those offices himself. Nasser promulgated a new constitution in 1956, greatly strengthening the powers of the presidency; its provisions were approved by a plebiscite in which he was also elected president.

Nasser proposed an economic system known as Arab socialism. As part of this program he confiscated 243,000 ha (600,000 acres) from wealthy landowners. In 1956, after the United States and Britain withdrew their support for Nasser's project to build the Aswan High Dam on the Nile, he nationalized the Suez Canal Company, promising to finance the dam with canal tolls. His action provoked an Israeli invasion of the Sinai Peninsula and an Anglo-French invasion of the Canal Zone (see ARAB-ISRAELI WARS; SUEZ CRISIS), but the invaders were forced to withdraw as a result of pressure brought to bear by the United Nations. Nasser won Soviet backing for the dam, which was completed in 1970.

In 1958, Egypt and Syria merged, forming the United Arab Republic with Nasser as its head. The merger broke up in 1961, but Egypt retained the name as a symbol for Nasser's hopes for Arab unity, until 1971.

Egypt's relations with Israel continued to deteriorate after the 1956 invasion, and in 1967, Nasser precipitated a crisis by expelling United Nations peacekeeping forces from the Gaza Strip and by blockading Elat, Israel's only Red Sea port. On June 5, Israel launched an offensive that became known as the Six-Day War. Egypt's humiliating defeat led Nasser to attempt to resign, but massive demonstrations in his favor caused him to resume office. Thereafter, he became increasingly dependent on the USSR for both military and economic aid.

Nasser was the acknowledged leader of the Arab world and was much admired in the emerging Third World nations. He remains a great national hero to the Egyptian people, who credit him with achieving Egyptian independence after more than 2,000 years of foreign domination. His ideas are detailed in his book, *The Philosophy of the Revolution* (1959).

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